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“There’s Fire in That Rain”

On Reading *Ad Litteram* and Reading “Allegorically”

**[Original Delivered Version Delivered at Conference]**

Lewis Ayres

I would like to offer this paper as a complement to Brian Daley’s keynote address this morning. I do this in part because I agree with his main thrust: a Catholic vision of Scripture and its interpretation can always fruitfully return to its sources in the early Christian period. The patristic vision of how God through his Word uses Scripture to draw us toward him forms – at least should form - the skeleton that gives shape to all the flesh of subsequent reflection on Scripture.. But I also want to offer this paper as a complement because I think there is a theme that I can usefully add to his account.

At the heart of his argument Brian focuses on the Patristic emphasis that one should read scripture as a unified story and in the light of the Gospel as it is known in the life of the Church. In the course of expounding this theme Brian also spoke powerfully of the relationship between reading the text literally and reading the text spiritually. Scripture is a unity, and a unity in the specific sense that it tells a consistent story of God’s action in history. Scripture tells a story in which God works in and through the events of history and the choices of human beings, in and through a world intended to signify its creator. Because Scripture tells this story and because it points always forward to include us within that story it seems to follow naturally that Christians will read the Scripture as itself a world

of signs, finding signs in the Old that point toward Christ, and signs in the new that speak of our situation now. To do so is to attend to what Scripture's divine author intends.

My own contribution will be to spend a little time thinking about what it means to read the Scripture according to the letter, "literally" and then to suggest that if we pay careful attention to the ways in which the Church developed what I will call (largely for the sake of stimulating discussion!) its own practice of literal reading, then we can see a little more of why various modes of allegorical or figural reading flow naturally from reading the letter of the text.

I

First, then, reading according to the letter, reading *ad litteram*. In passing it is worth noting that throughout this paper I will focus not with "levels" of meaning or sense or of the text – Patristic writers do use such phrase, but often very loosely – but on ways of reading. Speaking thus can save us much time and keep us from entering many very dark holes that seem to open before us.

In his paper Brian very nicely re-emphasized was that it took Christians a good while to decide what it would mean for them to be a scriptural community. But when people say such things they usually refer, I suspect, to the process of agreeing on the canon of Scripture in the sense of the list of books that would count as Scripture. My own concerns are rather different. Indeed, I suspect that the process of "choosing" texts is frequently misunderstood. First and second century Christians who show extended

knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures, not surprisingly, demonstrate little variation in which texts they took to be important. Had we more time I would also argue that by the middle of the second century there was actually very little doubt about which gospels and Pauline letters could be read out in the liturgical assembly. When we ask ourselves – following the title of Chuck Hill’s recent popular book – “who chose the gospels?” one of the best answers we can give is that there was no choosing, no act of selection parallel to that we make when we walk into a bookstore and pick from a large array of possibilities. Rather there was an act of gradual and increasing distinction made between the long used and plausible memoirs of the apostles, and other more recent and often localized texts.

But, even if I am right, I have said nothing about one of the most important developments in the Christian community during the second century. Christians became the scriptural community that they did not merely by choosing books and marking distinctions between those books and others, but also by choosing to *use and read those* books in a certain way. This involved the choice of particular reading practices, choices that even the texts of the “New Testament” could be read thus in exercises of doctrinal definition, and choices about how ideas and traditions from outwith these texts could be brought to bear in the work of interpretation. In other words it was as much the possession of a set of shared assumptions about how to read these texts as it was a sense of which were included in the list of books that gave Christians a canon of scripture.

If, then, we are to understand the character (and history) of theological interpretation we need to see how the Church developed these shared assumptions about how to read the text of scripture. Allow me to take a few minutes to tell that story before

reflecting doctrinally upon it. The story that I will tell concerns the gradual adoption by Christians of reading practices developed in ancient Greek and Latin traditions of literary commentary. This story will be the subject of my next monograph, and it differs in some respects from that which may be found in the standard textbooks.

My story begins, possibly in Rome, and probably in the 150s and 160s. These decades saw the appearance of texts written by Valentinian Gnostics and commenting on texts of the New Testament. The fragmentary material that survives of these commentaries treat those the New Testament as enigmatic or parabolic – these two terms having a technical sense. There is some relationship, as has often been noticed, between what happens in these texts and the way in which earlier Greek exegetical traditions read Homer. Just as Homer leaves us cues that behind his poetic language lies a detailed knowledge of the world’s metaphysical structure and our ascent toward true insight, the Valentinian interpreters I am discussing see the texts of the New Testament as providing clues that behind the lies the metaphysical truths that Jesus taught only in private to the select few. It is important to note that this style of interpretation is not arbitrary and it does not stand outside the long tradition of classical literary commentary. The allegorical/etymological readings offered are justified in part by using techniques of literary analysis to show that he author’s patterns of speech, ambiguities of expression and word order leave a trail that the educated and discerning any follow into the teaching lying beyond the actual words. Just as generations of allegorical interpreters had done before them, these Valentinian readers tried to use the cultural capital of ancient literary commentary as warrant for their vision of the Saviour’s higher teaching as lying behind the words of the New Testament.<sup>i</sup>

It is in response to this particular current of Valentinian exegesis that we see a number of the most famous Christian readers of the second century developing their exegetical technique. I include in this category, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, Hippolytus and Tertullian. But given the time available, I want to focus on Irenaeus. At the beginning of his *Against Heresies* Irenaeus's expressed concern is with precisely these figures. They have, he argues become bad exegetes. Some features of his response are well known: a call for interpretation to occur within the context of the publically attested and apostolic rule of faith, a call for interpretation of any given passage to occur within the context of the overall plot or hypothesis of Scripture. But it is important to understand that these prescriptions are part of a wider strategy Irenaeus also pursues, the strategy of claiming that any well educated ancient reader knows that one simply cannot treat the texts as the Valentinians do. Irenaeus does not only state this in the abstract but attempts to perform correct interpretation. Time and again Irenaeus suggests his opponents do not know how to punctuate a sentence, how to interpret a term by its use elsewhere in Scripture, how to recognize a figure of speech or a quirk of personal style, they do not know how to read a statement in its immediate context. All these reading practices are the stock in trade of the ancient literary critic.

Irenaeus sees his opponents attempting to co-opt some ancient literary critical techniques in order to claim the texts of the New Testament for their own enigmatic exegesis, and in response he makes what he sees as a stronger claim: Christians should use the central tradition of grammatical, literary analysis in the ancient world, one far more circumspect about where it accepted the presence of the enigmatic. But Irenaeus (and those who followed in his wake) did not simply *adopt* this tradition of commentary, they

also adapted to suit their own theological needs. In the first place, certain techniques become central, especially those that emphasize interpreting terms, statements and titles in the light of the scriptures as a whole, the use made of extra textual historical tradition is far more attenuated in Christian context. From this period one sees an increasing emphasis on expounding and expressing Christian belief through very close attention to the grammar and logic of the text itself. It because of this shift in the wake of Valentinian exegetes that we also see a very specifically Christian set of arguments about the different ways in which one may read a text appearing. Allegorical exegesis of the enigmatic is not banished but a discussion about how it should be deployed and policed emerges.

The techniques which figure so strongly in this anti-Valentinian polemic do appear from time before Irenaeus. On occasion, for example, Justin asks who is speaking in a particular psalm, following a standard practice of in ancient literary criticism. It is noticeable, I suggest, that he does so in polemic against Trypho's claim that the Psalms have nothing to do with Christ. Thus he clearly knows the literary world from which Irenaeus draws. But, for the most part, his exegesis and especially his doctrinal exposition follows an earlier model – he focuses on expounding ways in which Christ fulfils prophecy and develops his doctrinal account by drawing together titles and short passages to create webs of mutually reinforcing allusion. Only occasionally do we see exegetical moves that are not also found, for example in an earlier text like the *Epistle of Barnabas*.

But the techniques Irenaeus adapts are not simply at odds with the exegesis of the first half of the second century: his genius is to adapt them to bolster and develop earlier styles of linking Old to New Testaments and expounding how Christ fulfils the prophets

and the historical life of Israel. In other words he makes use of these traditions of literary commentary to shape a form of exegesis consonant with that found within the New Testament itself and within earliest Christian preaching. This consonance should not surprise, when we remember both Paul's own rhetorical knowledge and the probable interaction between proto-Rabbinic reading practice and that of the Hellenistic schools.

Allow me to make two more points about Irenaeus's methods. In the first place, note how the literal reading practices Irenaeus shapes overlap but are not identical with modern notions of the literal sense of the text as what the text meant to author or original hearers. One reason why Irenaeus claims that the Scriptures are not all to be interpreted as enigmatic discourse is that he thinks the basic story they tell to be historically real. Similarly he thinks that the claims that the Scriptures make about the structure of things are on their face true. What were once known by some as the "memoirs" of the apostles are certainly reliable. But this is not that same as saying that to interpret the letter our goal is always to reconstruct the circumstances of production or first hearing. Rather, belief in the historicity and basic truthfulness of the letter is accompanied by belief that the text is publically handed down by divine providence and stands as the source of our basic doctrine (in both senses of the Latin *doctrina*), needing only the application of literary techniques that foreground "the way the words run".

I have focused on Irenaeus for the sake of space. But let me note at the end of this section that after him they become the standard way of opposing Valentinius and indeed, Gnostics of all forms. Such is the case whether we look to Origen, to Tertullian or to Hippolytus. Moreover, they become the standard fare of doctrinal definition and argument



through the centuries that follow: the creeds and definitions of later centuries would, for example, be very different without them. I do not think, however, that later writers simply copied Irenaeus: many of later authors knew these techniques even better than Irenaeus. What matters is that they all adapt those practices in the same context and in remarkably similar ways. This controversy in the late second century was, in sum, the occasion for putting in place one of the most important capstones on the edifice of Christian canonical scripture, reading practices that shape what it means for it to be a “canon” in the sense of a rule or standard of judgment.

## II

At this point I want to pause from my historical story to offer a few brief doctrinal comments on the process I have described. There are, I suggest, two reasons why, from a Catholic perspective, the emergence of this style of scriptural reading must be read as a work of the Spirit in Christ’s body. First, there is the rather obvious parallel between the Church’s authorizing of the canon and the Church’s development of a reading practice; second, as I just noted these reading methods form the condition of possibility for our creedal faith.

Thus I suggest that while it is fair to say that theological interpretation of the Scriptures commences when we read in the light of the gospel, good theological interpretation also involves attention to these practices and to the tradition of readings generated by them. But to speak in this way demands a theological reflection on the

Father's use of Scripture in the divine economy, and it demands some discussion of the relationship between the methods of modern biblical study and these ancient traditions.

In his paper Kevin Vanhoozer drew attention to the recent writing of John Webster on the relationship between Scripture and Church, and I will do likewise. I have always found my conversations and disagreements with John highly fruitful (except, I should say when he told a rather liberal and indignant audience of my colleagues at Trinity College Dublin in 1995 that I thought pretty much the same as he did only with a Catholic gloss. It took me months to live that down). When John carefully separates the authority of Scripture from the Church he does so expressly in order to preserve God's freedom in action. For him to emphasize the role of the historical community of Christians in forming the canonical scripture is to undercut the true relationship between God's giving of the canon and the church's acknowledgment and reception of that divine gift. I see no reason why this is the only way of preserving the divine initiative in action.

A number of Catholic theologians writing at the time of the second Vatican council attempted to find ways describing the place of the Scriptural text in Tradition understood as the act of God's revelation in history. Congar's extensive treatment of tradition is one of the great monuments to this project, but for me some of the most promising if inchoate and gnomic suggestions of the period are in two early essays by the young Ratzinger. I have attempted to explore their potential elsewhere this year, for the moment let me note only one principle articulated there. Ratzinger argues for the importance of understanding the structure of God's revelation as a speaking, as a word that does not return empty handed because it is a word that in the Spirit always calls forth a response. The depths and

meaning of the word spoken by the Father are seen in the response that comes forth, but there is no sense here of the word passing somehow under human control – not because those who respond are puppets in the hands of the divine – but because the nature of divine action (as Brian reminded us) brings about our free actions. Thus receiving the Word may be understood not only as an act of submission before the canon as dogmatic fact, but also by accepting that one belongs to a community, a body whose reception and answer – in the form of the Church’s dogma, the lives of the saints, and the history of biblical interpretation or reception – is the work of the Spirit. Within such a perspective we may (and perhaps must) read doctrinally not only the establishment of the canon *per se*, but also the emergence of those practices and patterns of reading that made scripture Scripture in the second century and beyond, and which were the work of the Spirit enabling the body of Christ to come to grasp the character of our knowing and not knowing the divine.

Now, on the one hand, I have made some strong claims for a specific understanding of reading the letter of Scripture being the Church’s own, and consequently as a central part of any theological interpretation. But, on the other hand, I would be misunderstood quite seriously if I were thought to be implying a complete antipathy between this manner of reading and modern historical-critical modes of reading. Modern modes of biblical study are highly diverse and no global judgment should be made. In some cases modern concerns can directly help enhance what the Church has long done: it is no accident that concern to identify literary forms and genre has long been identified as a central feature of a modern Catholic Biblical study. At the same time concern with interpreting texts in the contexts of their production and first hearing can help us to open

the space between the speaking of the Word and the penetration of its mysteries as response to the Word is shaped by the work of Son and Spirit. Thus historical reconstruction may help us to see the process of Word and response at work, and this may be a real gain in our understanding. I make these rather gnomic points only to suggest possible lines of conversation: I think both that learning and celebrating something of the Church's own methods of *ad litteram* reading is at the heart of a properly "theological" interpretation, and that doing so opens a space for a multifaceted conversation with modern modes of biblical study.

### III

I have now offered both a brief historical sketch of how the Church's own literal sense emerged, and some doctrinal reflections on this emergence. In my last few paragraphs I would like to turn to a third topic, the relationship between interpretation and ascent into the mysteries of Christ. I will argue that there is an intrinsic link between reading the text of Scripture "literally" according to the practices I have identified and reading Scripture in ways that emphasize how every part may help us enter into the depths of the mystery of Christ.

Time is short, and I want to make only one basic point. Our first task when we seek to understand the place of "spiritual" interpretation - and here I use De Lubac's term for that which otherwise we might just call the allegorical or the figural - is to see the continuity between reading the letter of the text in the manner I have described and reading the text to see how the details of prophecy help us to understand Christ, or how

the details of any part of the text may help us to understand the mysteries of existence in Christ. Understanding this continuity – and seeing why it is so - is vitally important before we start trying to divide up types of spiritual interpretation.

Let me point to one example of a text that illustrates this continuity, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, a text probably dating from the first two decades of the second century. The letter claims not only that Christ, the master, has fulfilled the prophets, but that he speaks through them directly to us, foretelling what has now happened and giving us a foretaste of the eschaton. We see here a lovely example of the insistence on the significance of the text and yet also on the text being significant because of the presence of the living Christ in the Church. As Christians, Christ's fulfillment of prophecy is a tenet of our faith, and it is for *Barnabas* our consequent task to search the prophets as an offering to God, and in order to shape our faith, righteousness and love.

In the body of the letter *Barnabas* performs for us the search he encourages. In many cases he turns to material well known: he interweaves, for example, sections of Isaiah 50, Psalm 22 and 118 to tease out how Christ fulfills and is established as a rock and cornerstone in his suffering for us. These connections flow easily from the New Testament's own usage, but push beyond the precise connections found there. At times *Barnabas* turns also to material that will help us understand the character of the faithful life Christ shapes for us. He asks, for example, what Moses the prophet means by speaking of the land of milk and honey in Exodus 33. Moses, he suggests, offers a parable that refers to our gradual nourishment by faith and then by the Word directly when we are perfected. For *Barnabas*, Christ lives and works in the Church leading us to ever greater

understanding. But Christ lives and teaches in relationship to the Scriptures – here almost entirely the Jewish Scriptures. Barnabas is clear that the Scriptures are so central because of their divine inspiration, but his focus is always the text itself.

Barnabas's vocabulary for the interpretations he offers is complex and its context unclear. He speaks of types, he speaks of parables and he speaks of interpreting a text "in the Spirit": he need not offer a precise vocabulary or distinguish different types of readings simply because all flow for him from the fact that the living Christ speaks in the Church and does so in part through calling us meditate upon the text of Scripture. Barnabas wrote long before the battle against Valentinian exegesis led to the emergence of a new clarity about the Church's own methods of reading, but the links he demonstrates show how naturally those later reading practices build on a well-established set of links between the living voice of Christ in the Church and the textual mediation of our ascent into the mysteries of salvation.

My title alludes, as some may have guessed to the mighty voice of Brother Claude Ely, the Gospel Ranger. When he sang "send down that latter rain" he spoke of the promised sending of the Spirit, coming to wash and baptize; when he sang "there's fire in that rain Lord" he points to the multi-valence of the rain as that which both washes and burns away impurity. I suggest the relationship as an analogy for the various of reading scripture that should be ours. In his Word the Father has sent down upon us the rain of the scriptural text and led us to read its letter. But in that letter there lies also the fire which burns when we also learn to follow down the paths that Christ himself has opened up, reading the text to shape out own ascent into his mysteries.



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<sup>i</sup> This style of Valentinian interpretation culminates or at least stands within a broader tradition of figures using the techniques of ancient literary criticism to undercut the style of prophecy fulfillment preaching that seems to have been intrinsic to early Christian preaching and is certainly central to the way in which the New Testament swims in the currents of the Old. Thus we have figures such as Marcion engaging in textual criticism